

Transitioning from tuition to public funding

There are many ways to serve the public



BRIANA WEBER WITH
DAVID AYER

This is the story of a tuition-based school in Portland, Oregon that wanted to offer more Montessori to more children, and their navigation of the state's web of public support.

Oregon, like many states, offers a mosaic of support to help families access preschool or daycare for three- and four-year olds.

Multnomah County Preschool for All (PFA), launched in Oregon's most populous county in 2022, is a true Universal PreK program, aimed at offering free preschool to all children in the county by 2030. Multnomah County is home to about 800,000 people, 20% of Oregon's population of 4.3 million.

The program is funded at about \$65 million per year by a local income tax on high-income families and is comprehensive in scope, providing full-day, full-year care, prioritizing children with disabilities, BIPOC families, low-income, and unhoused children, disallowing suspensions and expulsions, and enforcing staffing qualifications and workforce wage standards.

PFA program has faced criticism for a slower-than expected rollout and some bureaucratic inflexibility, and although universal coverage is the ultimate goal, prioritization has led to a high proportion of children with additional needs in its placements, sur-



Outlining the shape of public Montessori

prising and even overwhelming some providers.

Oregon Preschool Promise (PP), a statewide means-tested program launched in 2016 with \$125 million in annual funding, is similar to PFA but available only to families meeting eligibility requirements (up to ~200% of the Federal Poverty Level).

Employment Related Dependent Care (ERDC), a child care subsidy program for low-income families who are working or attending school, has a \$600 million budget, primarily from federal funding.

With the advent of PFA in particular, Montessori programs in Oregon have been exploring working with these funding streams to provide more access to Montessori education for young children. *MontessoriPublic* sat down with Briana Weber, Head of School at Harmony Montessori in Portland, to learn more about the school's transi-

tion from mostly tuition-based to mostly subsidized over the last four years, and the steps along the way.

MontessoriPublic: Thanks for speaking with me today.

Briana Weber: Happy to be here!

MP: Tell me a little about yourself. How did you get involved with Montessori?

BW: Great question. I went to school to be an elementary teacher at Western Oregon University—where I never heard anything about Montessori—and I had a class called math for elementary students where we essentially learned to train children to take standardized tests. And I said, “No. This is not the teacher I want to be.” So I decided to

continues >

become a music teacher.

After graduation, I moved to Portland and worked in childcare. A parent in my classroom was taking Montessori training and said, “You need to do this.” And I did.

After *that*, I was a primary assistant and guide, and did some Reggio and RIE-inspired work, and eventually became a school director.

MP: All in private programs?

BW: Yes. And a stint in “corporate Montessori.” But it wasn’t for me. When I found my current position at Harmony, it just felt like coming home.

MP: Tell us about Harmony.

BW: We have four primary classrooms with 80 students, and a new toddler classroom. Harmony was tuition-based but already moving towards subsidized when I arrived. It’s part of the mission. We had 40 PFA slots already in 2021, just coming out of COVID. A lot of schools were regrouping—trying to reorient to the needs of the families, the needs of your community.

At that time for Harmony, it felt like a great time think, how can we help, and where are some funding sources? We also had a flood, so we moved—to a more vibrant, diverse, lower socio-economic neighborhood. It’s an amazing part of town to be in. There is a really active community development corporation where we’re building some bridges. I’m really passionate about building more community connections and looking at things like wraparound care along with providing high quality Montessori education.

So when you’re adding in all of these pieces it just makes sense to also find all of the funding strategies that you can for the children. Our plan is to slowly increase our PFA and PP numbers as we can, with a balance of some tuition based slots. That’s partly because we’re

still remodeling our building, and, unfortunately, we can’t use the state and county money for that. So we’re also applying for the Childcare Infrastructure Fund and Build Up Oregon, major grants that rolled out last year to bolster capacity and improve childcare statewide.

MP: So you use all the sources of funding you can find. How do they all work?

BW: Well, PFA is free tuition for three- and four-year-olds in Multnomah county. That’s about half of our enrollment. There is priority for children with IFSPs (Individualized Family Service Plan, a special education document outlining services for children with developmental delays or disabilities), families of color, or immigrant/refugee/houseless status. And no expulsions or suspensions. So if a child is placed at our school, we meet their needs as much as possible. We do behavior interventions to help children succeed and thrive, and we meet with families and Early Intervention, and do as much as we can. I’m proud that we have only had a couple of recommendations for other placements.

MP: And how has that been going?

BW: It’s been a process, to be honest.

The first year we were really not prepared for who the children were coming to us. We met a lot of challenges we didn’t expect. For example, our number of neurodiverse students went up drastically. With the priority for IFSP children, that opened up our view of where those disparities are happening in childcare. Let’s be real—sometimes providers will choose not to enroll students with difficulties. Or maybe it’s going to be less accessible because of the cost.

Our numbers went from about 9% having an IFSP to 25–30%. —in some classrooms, half of the students. As

you know, you start out the year with one number, and as year goes along you notice other children that need referrals and evaluations.

It’s important for us to make sure we’re working with the different organizations that provide services. And now we’re kind of known in the Portland community as a Montessori school that is more inclusive and welcoming into neurodiverse families and students. I’m really proud of that.

At the same time, we are not a special education school, and it’s definitely a burden on our teachers. Our guides went to school to be Montessorians, and there’s a different skill set when it comes to our special education.

So we’ve been navigating how we meet that, and we still haven’t really come to an answer. But every year is a little bit better. More sites that are joining the program, so the hope is once universal preschool is really universal throughout the county, it will be more balanced. At the same time we have been doing in-house trainings on positive discipline and inclusion, and we’re getting a lot of support from PFA to make that happen which has felt great. We didn’t always know what to ask for, which was a huge part of it. Over the last three years we have learned not to be afraid to be really vocal when things are not working, or we have questions, and that has really made the program better. I hope so!

MP: Did you have you had to adjust staffing?

BW: Yes—we have three teachers in every primary classroom with 20 students. PFA funds that third teacher if we have four IFSPs. We found that really works well for us. The teachers feel more supported, instead of having a person coming in and out. There’s just a tight team of folks who know who the children are and can predict the needs

continues >

to get through the day. We're rolling with that model moving forward.

One year we tested out four teachers in a classroom, and that was too many adults, too many bodies in the room. Especially since we constantly have outside service providers coming in through Early Intervention and even some private therapy. We had a couple of ABA technicians working one-on-one with students. So we try to balance making sure the classroom is not too full, and giving the team everything they need.

MP: And Preschool Promise? A similar program with a similar name.

BW: Yes. It's tricky for families. That program is state funded and income-based. Families apply, and upload income documents. It only covers school day, school year tuition—no aftercare, no summer. The program covers another 25% of our students.

The biggest benefit is that I can meet with families and request a placement, while PFA is a lottery. I can have a tour with a family, learn if they are qualified for PP, and do regular enrollment. So we're more able to come together and make that decision with a family rather than having them be assigned to us.

With PFA, they may not have chosen us because we're a Montessori school. It could be the closest one to their house. Some families think we're Catholic. So with a new family it's like, "Oh, now you're at our school," and going from there.

MP: And then there is ERDC.

BW: Yes, that comes through DHS. Low income families, immigrant/refugee families, and children in foster care system qualify. There's a long waitlist, though, and it can get kind of messy. But it's worth it, because it makes care that much more accessible. Some of my PP students use ERDC as well to pay

for school day—they can use a mixture. In our toddler program, three-fourths of my toddlers use ERDC.

There's some overlap, but overall 17 or 18 children use ERDC. Only a handful of students pay full tuition.

MP: So this all sounds like a lot. Having to corral and balance these funding streams to make sure you're using the right dollars for the right thing.

BW: Exactly. And making sure we're looking outwards at what other revenue streams are available. For example, we're struggling to retain kindergartners, so we're looking at different ways to supplement that. We just haven't found the answer yet.

MP: Why do people leave?

BW: Well, the Kindergarten is tuition-based, so often they go to their neighborhood school, or one of the two charter Montessori programs in Portland. The funded programs only cover three- and four-year-olds.

MP: And you can't really stretch two years of dollars to cover three years of school.

BW: Definitely not. And often it's not even allowed.

MP: What would you say have been the biggest challenges? Besides what we've already talked about!

BW: Well, in our neighborhood there's a cultural challenge. People don't understand what Montessori is, and they think that their child could never come to our school because of cultural, socioeconomic disparities like they perceive at the school. There is tuition, and they may not know that they can use ERDC to pay it, and that their child likely could come here for free just using that funding. I think a lot of people

don't even know we're an option. I'm trying to break down that barrier as much as I can.

MP: What does that look like?

BW: Going to community events, putting up flyers. That's our first step. We are attending some local health fairs, and hosting events in this really large parking lot we have at our new facility.

We also want to hire a staff that is more reflective of who we serve. A lot of our staff is white, and I can imagine if you're a person of color coming in seeing a staff that's white, that could be a barrier. Because you want to see yourself, or who your child is reflected in the teaching. We're working hard to find and hire people of color who are Montessori-trained.

Another challenge, or maybe just a difference, is that we're approaching Montessori in a different way from some things in my training. You might not see every single Montessori material on the shelves, because sometimes it's not appropriate or safe for the children we actually have. We have a lot of neurodiverse children, and we can't always have every single spooning and pouring activity out because we have some children putting every single thing in their mouths. Sometimes when we have people who come from other Montessori schools, they can be curious about that, or seeing three teachers in the classroom. But what we're doing is following the children who are in our classrooms.

MP: And what are some parts of this that you are really loving?

BW: Our staff for sure. The staff at the school are the bones in the backbone of why we're so successful. We're very democratic, so policy decisions, changes that are happening—we discuss it as a team. And it's not just

continues >

admin team, not just the lead guides. It's everybody.

I also love that we are inclusion driven. We are looking to the children to tell us what they need on a regular basis, and then we're really curious and adjusting and adapting as needed.

Overall things are going great this year. It's been a really wonderful year compared to the previous years, and it makes me hopeful for the future.

MP: Hopeful for the future. Thanks for speaking with me today.

Briana Weber is the Head of School at Harmony Montessori in Portland, Oregon.

MontessoriPublic

MontessoriPublic, the communications and advocacy platform for public Montessori is a publication of

NATIONAL CENTER for
MONTESSORI in the
PUBLIC SECTOR

Subscribe at montessoripublic.org

Noncommercial reproduction of this material is permitted and encouraged. Consult authors for rights to copyrighted articles.

Copyright 2025 National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector